

# AUSTIN BUSINESS JOURNAL

Vol. 23, No. 24

WHERE CENTRAL TEXAS CAPITALIZES ON BUSINESS

August 29-September 4, 2003

## CUSTOMER SERVICE — SMALL BUSINESS



ABJ PHOTO / SARAH KERVER

Husband-and-wife owners John and Elaine Gibbs emphasize employee retention and customer satisfaction in operating their house-cleaning franchise.

# Tender Loving Clean

## The Maids Home Services of Austin brings 'TLC' to house cleaning

by AMY E. LEMEN - Special to the Austin Business Journal

There's something about being on a team that's better than working alone. Maybe it's the camaraderie and having someone else to talk to as you complete the task at hand. Or maybe it's that there are other people with you, helping out on the same project. In either case, you're in this together, making a tough project seem a little easier.

That's much of the philosophy behind



The Maids Home Services, an international residential cleaning franchise with operations in Austin. Instead of one or two workers tackling a house, teams of four arrive smiling at the client's front door, ready to wipe away the result of that week's havoc at the house.

"Each person on the team knows what to do, so they don't waste any time," says John Gibbs, who owns the Austin franchise of The Maids Home Services with his wife, Elaine. "Everyone helps each other. Our system is much more comprehensive than your standard maid service."

That consistency and attention to detail have paid off for the franchise, not only as a winner in the customer service category

# MAIDS: Company's culture promotes employee retention

among companies with less than 50 employees for the 2003 Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce Small Business Awards, but also in the company's customer comment cards.

The cards, which solicit feedback, are dropped off after each job. The maids receive consistently high marks from enthusiastic customers, one of which writes poems for the staff about the great job they've done on her house.

However, to make sure the company maintains these marks, Maids Services offers its "Tender Loving Clean" service to customers every six months, when the team spends extra time on the home to make sure all the details are covered.

"We also call after the first three cleans, and then every quarter after that, to make sure things are in sync," Gibbs says. "We really listen to what our customers have to say, and the cards provide positive and constructive feedback to the team."

Gibbs is a soft-spoken man who really seems to enjoy the business he's operating. He and Elaine were looking for a franchise business opportunity back in 1994, when he retired after spending 26 years flying fighter jets in the Air Force.

"It was the right investment — no nights or weekends, and we would be working with people," Gibbs says. "It had the potential to not only provide revenue but also to be a good company."

It's been nine years, and Maids Services now has five full-time employees and 40 field employees. Gibbs expects revenue for 2003 to be around \$1.2 million. But as with most service businesses here, Austin's tech bust hit the house-cleaning company hard.

Although the company is still doing well, new sales are down. Gibbs says he understands cleaning services are an added extra for most people and he has adjusted his rates accordingly.

"We're a premier service company that is very detailed, but if a customer can't afford the premium service, we need to reach out and do what we can to help them," he says.

House cleanings cost \$120/hour for a

team of four, which divides upon arrival to separate duties: kitchen, bathroom, dusting and vacuuming. The time each job takes depends on the number of rooms, people, pets and the location's square footage.

Maids Services gives estimates for every house, and then it looks at the price again after the first three jobs to make sure circumstances haven't changed. The company also checks then to make sure that the customer is satisfied so far with the company's work.

"We're very fair with our customers," Gibbs says. "We put professionalism into the cleaning business."

That professional service includes not using voicemail on company phones, ensuring that customers talk to a live receptionist during business hours. Maids Services also schedules appointments for "do-overs" within 24 hours if a customer calls with a complaint.

"We always work with people," Gibbs says. "We have the flexibility that some small companies don't really have."

A large part of Maids Services' careful attention to detail is in its people. The company has a field manager, Sandy Robinson, who acts as the liaison among the customer, the franchise office and the cleaning team. She's also responsible for employee training and performance evaluations.

Gibbs says Robinson is an invaluable resource to the company — and others think so, too. Robinson recently was selected among Maids Services' 300-plus managers around the country as its Manager of the Year.

"We increased our customer retention 4 percent last year and have kept it up this year, too," Gibbs says. "Part of that is the program we've implemented that focuses on retention."

Larry Jones is president of The Performance Edge Inc., a business consulting firm in Austin. He started out as a Maids Services customer, but he was so impressed with Gibbs and the company that he wanted to help.

"I got the customer newsletter they send out and was impressed with their approach to employee satisfaction and retention," he says. "[Maids Services'] system of operation is really well-designed; they pay a lot of attention to make sure employees are appreciated."

Gibbs says the average employee has been there 2.3 years, and there's not much turnover. Jones consulted with Gibbs on developing a system to ensure his workforce remains strong.

"We developed a scorecard system for employees that shows them where they stand in the areas of attendance, number of complaints, attitude and other factors," Gibbs says. "It allows them to make decisions where to improve and has made a significant difference in our retention rate."

The company also is dedicated to community service. There are food drives that benefit the Capital Area Food Bank, raffles, and cleaning service donations to charities and silent auctions. In the past, Maids Services also has had a chaplain program that offers food, shelter and medical assistance to employees in times of need. Yet Gibbs has had to suspend it temporarily because of the economy.

"They really care about people," Jones says. "They do things the right way, and it's conveyed to their employees. That's not always an easy thing to do."

Customers get a quarterly newsletter to keep them up to date, as well as to give them the opportunity to participate in Maids Services' community initiatives, such as food drives. The newsletter also helps customers get more acquainted with their cleaning teams through pictures and stories. Yet, ultimately, Gibbs says it's all about getting to know the customer.

"House cleaning can be such a faceless job, and the team rarely sees the customer," he says. "When you don't know people, you don't care for them in the same way."

AMY E. LEMEN is a freelance writer based in Austin.